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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2143  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000300

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/24/2018  
TAGS: [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: DAS MARCIEL HEARS CONTRASTING  
VIEWS OF THE SITUATION

REF: A. BANGKOK 06821 (SOUTHERN DIALOGUE FACILITATOR

GIVES OPTOMISTIC READ-OUT)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 06161 (SURAYUD TALKS TO THE BRN-C)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: In meetings to discuss the situation in southern Thailand on January 23 and 24, Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel received widely contrasting views on

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Thai government efforts to end the violence. Dr. Mark Tamthai, National Reconciliation Committee member and advisor to interim Prime Minister Surayud on the southern Thailand peace process, told Marciel that he was optimistic about the prospects of the secret peace process now underway, and that militant leaders were actively engaged in discussing power sharing arrangements with the Thai government. Tamthai emphasized that the US should seek no role in the South. Human Rights Watch contact Sunai Phasuk, in contrast, described a situation where security forces were intent on suppressing the violence through intimidation and human rights abuses. These contrasting views highlighted the difference between national level efforts to seek a solution to the unrest, and the reality on the ground as perceived by human rights advocates. End Summary.

Optomistic View on Secret Negotiations

[1](#)2. (S/NF) On January 23, Dr. Mark Tamthai, National Reconciliation Committee member and advisor to Interim Prime Minister Surayud on the southern Thailand peace process, had a wide ranging discussion with Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel about the current situation in the South and the prospects for peace. Without providing details, Tamthai admitted to Marciel that there was a secret peace process underway, and he was optimistic about its chances for

success. He said the process had been going on for at least a year, and now was ready to transition to a new less secret phase. For it to be successful, he said, more people need to be brought into the process. Once this process becomes public knowledge, however, he knows critics will pick it apart.

13. (C) According to Tamthai, the government understands the current military solution to the violence is not working. Southern Thai Muslims see the Army as occupiers and will never cooperate with it. To resolve the situation in the south, Tamthai said, the Thai government must address two issues: justice sector reform and power sharing with the central government. The two must be done together. Either alone will not work. Legal reforms may alleviate some of the conditions underlying the violence, but will not solve the issue. People coming from Bangkok to run things in the south will remain a grievance. Only when both these issues are addressed can there be discussions on things like development and education. The population generally does not support the insurgency, but they will not work against it either.

14. (S/NF) Tamthai said he does not know how the new government in Bangkok will react to the peace process. It will be up to outgoing Prime Minister Surayud to convince the new Prime Minister that this process holds the best chance of success for resolving the situation. He believes the new government does not have a firm position on the south and is optimistic it will appoint people who know the issue to continue work on it.

15. (S/NF) Talking about the reason behind his optimism for reconciliation, Tamthai believes he has seen a shift in the negotiating positions of both the militants and the government. The leadership of the insurgency is no longer demanding independence because they know it is impossible. Now they are looking at some type of power sharing. On the government side, the change is that they are now actually able to talk about power sharing. The issue is now one of

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characterizing the arrangements being considered. He said, in Thai, the language of self government, such as the word autonomy, sounds too much like independence for the Thais to accept. Calling it power sharing is more palatable. According to Tamthai, however, the big change is that this is now a topic for discussion. "What shall we call it," not whether we can talk about it.

16. (S/NF) Continuing to emphasize language as a measure of progress, Tamthai said another change is hearing insurgents saying things like "the population is having problems with the state." He believes this reflects an implicit acceptance of the state's authority. He said the recent parliamentary election was not disrupted because the militant,s know they need a stable government to deal with. The military government had no checks and balances and people in the south are aware that elections would help them move forward on their own goals.

17. (S/NF) Anticipating questions about whether the militant leaders they were dealing with could actually control the violence, Tamthai asserted they could. According to Tamthai, the leaders told them they can deliver on "organized" violence, or large scale attacks, but there were many smaller groups he termed "youth level" that were harder to control. The militants said it would take more time to bring these groups under control and would involve discussing the situation with them. Tamthai said the leaders told him that they would need about a month to bring 80 to 90 percent of the violence under control. In the short term, they could deliver on about 60 percent.

18. (S/NF) Tamthai said that the level of violence is a poor measure for understanding the situation. He noted the wild swings in statistics about the number of attacks,

assassinations, etc., and said a lull in the violence means nothing. Explaining further, he said if the militants feel the peace process is going well, they voluntarily slow their operations. If they feel challenged, however, or need to show they still have the capacity to fight, they stage attacks.

¶9. (S/NF) Marciel asked Tamthai how the Buddhist minority in the south would react to power sharing. Tamthai said different Buddhist communities might react differently. Some Buddhist communities in the south are well established and will take it in stride. Some, however, are worried - like the ones with the village defense volunteers. Considering further, Tamthai said the arming of civilian groups needs to be stopped because the profusion of weapons among these groups just makes the situation worse.

¶10. (C) Marciel asked Tamthai why we do not see foreign actors in the south, and whether any foreign governments have influence over the groups responsible for the violence. Tamthai responded by describing the nationalistic nature of the insurgency. "This is about nationalism and control." It is not driven by fundamental Islam. The militants believe if they accept outside help, those outsiders will want a stake in control of the deep south -- which the militants cannot accept. Some individuals may accept help from outsiders, but the movement will not accept it. Tamthai went on to say that he would not be surprised if "outsiders" did manage to get into the south. Although the people would not work with them, they also would not turn them in. Explaining further Tamthai said that Islam in southern Thailand is not the conservative fundamentalist brand embraced by the likes of JI. Islam in southern Thailand is less restrictive and more pragmatic. People in this part of the world have confidence in their practice of Islam and do not look to those groups for guidance on the practice of their religion. "There is a history of Islam here."

¶13. (C) Closing the meeting, Tamthai emphasized that the US has no role in resolving the situation in southern Thailand.

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He praised the US for not becoming involved in the conflict.

Human Rights Watch Pessimistic

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¶14. (C) In a separate meeting on January 24 with Human Rights Watch (HRW), Thailand representative Sunai Phasuk told DAS Marciel that the human rights situation in the South had not improved since the September 2006 coup d'etat. Sunai said the post-coup interim government led by Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont had missed a key opportunity for reconciliation by failing to take steps to reduce tension between the ethnic Malay Muslim and ethnic Thai Buddhist communities, and by not adequately controlling security forces' use of strong-arm tactics. Sunai complained that human rights abuses, such as the extra-judicial killing, arbitrary arrest, and torture of suspected militants have continued. He claimed that the Royal Thai Army routinely abused suspected insurgents, subjecting them to forced nudity, sleep deprivation, lack of food and water, and prolonged isolation and confinement.

¶15. (C) Sunai explained how the South had entered a "warlord period" wherein army commanders in each province have each taken a different approach in combating the violence. Sunai praised the army divisional commander in Yala Province, whom he characterized as committed to winning "hearts and minds" by promoting coordination between the military, police and civilian officials. Sunai also said the Yala commander had promised to court martial subordinates who violated human rights. Nevertheless, Sunai described Narathiwat and Pattani provinces as "hell," where army commanders continue to turn a blind eye to abuses committed by their subordinates.

¶16. (C) Sunai emphasized that the interim government has generally failed to promote justice, accountability, and respect for human rights. In particular Sunai said the government's failure to investigate abuses committed by the Thaksin government has reinforced the perception by many in the South that security officials can act with impunity. Sunai recounted a particularly chilly encounter with Surapong Suebwonglee, the Secretary General of the People's Power Party (PPP), who disturbingly told Sunai in early January that the PPP plans to "start another drug war" soon after forming a government. (Note: From 2003-2005, the Thaksin government's "War on Drugs" is believed to have resulted in the extra-judicial killings of approximately 2,000 people, particularly in Thailand's South, North, and other border areas. End note.) Sunai feared that abuses would continue as several PPP leaders have not exhibited a prior respect for human rights and the rule of law.

¶17. (S/NF) Comment: These two conversations put the contrasting understanding of the situation in southern Thailand in sharp relief. The conversation with Tamthai demonstrates that some in the Thai government do understand the issues driving the conflict. It is unclear to what extent that "big picture" understanding affects what is happening on the ground. Sunai Phasuk, the Human rights Watch representative, maintains a wide network of grass roots contacts throughout the south. While we are waiting for firm evidence to support his allegations, his statements reflect, at a minimum, the perception of human rights NGOs monitoring the conflict.

¶18. (S/NF) Comment continued: It is apparent that interim Prim Minister Surayud was a driving force behind reconciliation efforts. Given the small circle of government officials supporting the reconciliation efforts, and the pending change in government, it is difficult to share Tamthai's optimism regarding the future of peace in the south, as Surayud's departure will remove the chief proponent of the negotiations from authority.

¶19. (U) DAS Marciel has cleared on this message.

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JOHN